

Barack Obama

Awarding the Medal of Honor to Staff Sergeant Salvatore A. Giunta

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Of all the privileges that come with serving as President of the United States, I have none greater than serving as Commander-in-Chief of the finest military that the world has ever known. And of all the military decorations that a President and a nation can bestow, there is none higher than the Medal of Honor.

Today is particularly special. Since the end of the Vietnam War, the Medal of Honor has been awarded nine times for conspicuous gallantry in an ongoing or recent conflict. Sadly, our nation has been unable to present this decoration to the recipients themselves, because each gave his life -- his last full measure of devotion -- for our country. Indeed, as President, I have presented the Medal of Honor three times -- and each time to the families of a fallen hero.

Today, therefore, marks the first time in nearly 40 years that the recipient of the Medal of Honor for an ongoing conflict has been able to come to the White House and accept this recognition in person. It is my privilege to present our nation's highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor, to a soldier as humble as he is heroic: Staff Sergeant Salvatore A. Giunta.

The Medal of Honor reflects the gratitude of an entire nation. So we are also joined here today by several members of Congress, including both senators and several representatives from Staff Sergeant Giunta's home state of Iowa.

We are especially honored to be joined by Staff Sergeant Giunta's fellow soldiers, his teammates and brothers from Battle Company, 2d of the 503d of the 173d Airborne Brigade; and several members of that rarest of fraternities that now welcomes him into its ranks -- the Medal of Honor Society. Please give them a big round of applause.

We also welcome the friends and family who made Staff Sergeant Giunta into the man that he is, including his lovely wife, Jenny; and his parents, Steven and Rosemary; as well as his siblings, who are here. It was his mother, after all, who apparently taught him as a young boy in small-town Iowa how to remove the screen from his bedroom window in case of fire. What she didn't know was that by teaching Sal how to jump from his bedroom and sneaking off in the dead of night, she was unleashing a future paratrooper -- who would one day fight in the rugged mountains of Afghanistan 7,000 miles away.

During the first of his two tours of duty in Afghanistan, Staff Sergeant Giunta was forced early on to come to terms with the loss of comrades and friends. His team leader at the time gave him a piece of advice: "You just try -- you just got to try to do everything you can when it's your time to do it." You've just got to try to do everything you can when it's your time to do it.

Salvatore Giunta's time came on October 25, 2007. He was a Specialist then, just 22 years old.

Sal and his platoon were several days into a mission in the Korengal Valley -- the most dangerous valley in northeast Afghanistan. The moon was full. The light it cast was enough to travel by without using their night-vision goggles. With heavy gear on their backs, and air support overhead, they made their way single file down a rocky ridge crest, along terrain so steep that sliding was sometimes easier than walking.

They hadn't traveled a quarter mile before the silence was shattered. It was an ambush, so close that the cracks of the guns and the whizz of the bullets were simultaneous. Tracer fire hammered the ridge at hundreds of rounds per minute -- "more," Sal said later, "than the stars in the sky."

The Apache gunships above saw it all, but couldn't engage with the enemy so close to our soldiers. The next platoon heard the shooting, but were too far away to join the fight in time.

And the two lead men were hit by enemy fire and knocked down instantly. When the third was struck in the helmet and fell to the ground, Sal charged headlong into the wall of bullets to pull him to safety behind what little cover there was. As he did, Sal was hit twice -- one round slamming into his body armor, the other shattering a weapon slung across his back.

They were pinned down, and two wounded Americans still lay up ahead. So Sal and his comrades regrouped and counterattacked. They threw grenades, using the explosions as cover to run forward, shooting at the muzzle flashes still erupting from the trees. Then they did it again. And again. Throwing grenades, charging ahead. Finally, they reached one of their men. He'd been shot twice in the leg, but he had kept returning fire until his gun jammed.

As another soldier tended to his wounds, Sal sprinted ahead, at every step meeting relentless enemy fire with his own. He crested a hill alone, with no cover but the dust kicked up by the storm of bullets still biting into the ground. There, he saw a chilling sight: the silhouettes of two insurgents carrying the other wounded American away -- who happened to be one of Sal's best friends. Sal never broke stride. He leapt forward. He took aim. He killed one of the insurgents and wounded the other, who ran off.

Sal found his friend alive, but badly wounded. Sal had saved him from the enemy -- now he had to try to save his life. Even as bullets impacted all around him, Sal grabbed his friend by the vest and dragged him to cover. For nearly half an hour, Sal worked to stop the bleeding and help his friend breathe until the MEDEVAC arrived to lift the wounded from the ridge. American gunships worked to clear the enemy from the hills. And with the battle over, First Platoon picked up their gear and resumed their march through the valley. They continued their mission.

It had been as intense and violent a firefight as any soldier will experience. By the time it was finished, every member of First Platoon had shrapnel or a bullet hole in their gear. Five were wounded. And two gave their lives: Sal's friend, Sergeant Joshua C. Brennan, and the platoon medic, Specialist Hugo V. Mendoza.

Now, the parents of Joshua and Hugo are here today. And I know that there are no words that, even three years later, can ease the ache in your hearts or repay the debt that America owes to you. But on behalf of a grateful nation, let me express profound thanks to your sons' service and their sacrifice. And could the parents of Joshua and Hugo please stand briefly?

Staff Sergeant Giunta, repeatedly and without hesitation, you charged forward through extreme enemy fire, embodying the warrior ethos that says, "I will never leave a fallen comrade." Your actions disrupted a devastating ambush before it could claim more lives. Your courage prevented the capture of an American soldier and brought that soldier back to his family. You may believe that you don't deserve this honor, but it was your fellow soldiers who recommended you for it. In fact, your commander specifically said in his recommendation that you lived up to the standards of the most decorated American soldier of World War II, Audie Murphy, who famously repelled an overwhelming enemy attack by himself for one simple reason: "They were killing my friends."

That's why Salvatore Giunta risked his life for his fellow soldiers -- because they would risk their lives for him. That's what fueled his bravery -- not just the urgent impulse to have their backs, but the absolute confidence that they had his. One of them, Sal has said -- of these young men that he was with, he said, "They are just as much of me as I am." They are just as much of me as I am.

So I would ask Sal's team, all of Battle Company who were with him that day, to please stand and be recognized as well. Gentlemen, thank you for your service. We're all in your debt. And I'm proud to be your Commander-in-Chief.

These are the soldiers of our Armed Forces. Highly trained. Battle-hardened. Each with specialized roles and responsibilities, but all with one thing in common -- they volunteered. In an era when it's never been more tempting to chase personal ambition or narrow self-interest, they chose the opposite. They felt a tug; they answered a call; they said, "I'll go." And for the better part of a decade, they have endured tour after tour in distant and difficult places; they have protected us from danger; they have given others the opportunity to earn a better and more secure life.

They are the courageous men and women serving in Afghanistan even as we speak. They keep clear focus on their mission: to deny safe haven for terrorists who would attack our country, to break the back of the Taliban insurgency, to build the Afghans' capacity to defend themselves. They possess the steely resolve to see their mission through. They are made of the same strong stuff as the troops in this room, and I am absolutely confident that they will continue to succeed in the missions that we give them, in Afghanistan and beyond.

After all, our brave servicemen and women and their families have done everything they've been asked to do. They have been everything that we have asked them to be. "If I am a hero," Sal has said, "then every man who stands around me, every woman in the military, every person who defends this country is." And he's right.

This medal today is a testament to his uncommon valor, but also to the parents and the community that raised him; the military that trained him; and all the men and women who served by his side.

All of them deserve our enduring thanks and gratitude. They represent a small fraction of the American population, but they and the families who await their safe return carry far more than their fair share of our burden. They fight halfway around the globe, but they do it in hopes that our children and our grandchildren won't have to.

They are the very best part of us. They are our friends, our family, our neighbors, our classmates, our coworkers. They are why our banner still waves, our founding principles still shine, and our country -- the United States of America -- still stands as a force for good all over the world.